

## INTRODUCTION:

Sign language is a lifeline for people who don't, or can't, use spoken language.  
But in small, rural communities - there often aren't many people who use it.  
That leaves people dependent on sign language isolated and alone... with few ways to talk to the world around them.

One man in Corner Brook knows that experience all too well.  
As David Kennedy faces a future where he won't be able to hear...  
he's taken it upon himself to change how people in his town communicate.  
And his efforts have gone further than he could ever imagine.  
Here's Lindsay Bird's documentary, Signs of Change.

\*\*\*\**Sound effects: music plays*\*\*\*\*

David Kennedy:

For 7 years of my life, being part of the deaf community was very important to me. Because for a long time when I started to sign, I turned my voice off. So for a long time, I didn't actually use my voice.

When I'm talking to you, one-on-one, we're basically just having a conversation. But if you ever sat down and watched two people in sign language communicate, their facial expressions, it become more of a..

Lynn Drover:

...it's a more intimate conversation. Your whole body's in the conversation. You're not just on your phone, and you know, just passively saying something to somebody. You have to be engaged 100 per cent and you can't look away, or you lose so much. Even when you're not using your hands to sign, your body speaks wonders. And unless you're 100 per cent in the conversation, you miss so much of it. And it's not the same as using your voice, because you're only using one part of your senses, whereas with sign, you're using all of them. Your whole body has to be showing what you're trying to say. There's no passive conversation in sign. It becomes very much a dance between your body and your hands.

Lindsay Bird:

Lynn Drover and David Kennedy don't just finish each other's sentences. Even when their words trail off, their hands keep going, the two signing back and forth in a connection so strong you can actually see it. It's a connection all the more remarkable in the fact that, a year ago, these two didn't even know each other.

\*\*\*\*\**Sound effects: opening door to toy store, Lynn says "hi, how are you today?"*\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\**Sound effects: winding up a toy robot*\*\*\*\*\*

LD:

These are windup robots. We have robot races with these guys.

LB:

Those retro robots are just one of the many timeless toys Lynn stocks. And it was here, last winter, in her store, that Lynn encountered a little girl who changed everything.

LD:

I've been trying to teach myself sign language for a few years now. And it wasn't until I opened Kinder Castle and started serving a lot of autistic and people with sensory processing disorders, that I realized it's not just about being deaf, that would make you need to know sign language. Particularly, there was this one girl who's non verbal. She's not deaf, she just doesn't speak. And she was in the store one day, and I really wanted to ask her how her experience was, and what her favourite toy was, and ask all the questions you would normally ask a child in a toy store. And she just didn't respond. And her mom had to advocate for her, and it was really, really upsetting to me. Because I like to talk to the kids who come in here, and see what things they like best, so that we can continue to offer them here. So, after I went home that night, that little girl was still in my mind, and I went looking for someone to teach me sign language. Because I tried so long to learn it myself that I knew... I was not self motivated I guess! So I went looking for someone to teach me, and my friend linked me up with David, and that's where it started.

DK:

I've been wanting to teach sign language for 15 years, and I've been fluent in sign language for 23 years.

LB:

David's fluency in sign began by accident. A childhood accident, when he was seven years old, that permanently damaged his hearing.

DK:

So as I was going through the years of school, I was struggling each year. I failed grade 4. Then, when I hit grade 9, I failed again.

LB:

Early on - doctors warned David and his family that he'd continue to lose more and more of his hearing, and at some point, he would very likely go deaf. The best thing to do was prepare for that possibility and learn American Sign Language, or ASL, the standard signing language across North America. But to do that - he would have to move away from his family. 600 kilometres away, to the only school in the province that could help him, in St. John's.

DK:

I used to have a teacher, her name was Sue Lee. And she was like, how would you feel about going to the Newfoundland School for the Deaf? I was iffy, I didn't want to leave my friends and family. So anyway, I moved to the School for the Deaf in 1995. And the first year was tough. because they all knew sign language, and I didn't. And then, as the year went through, I got more and more comfortable, and now I feel more comfortable in the deaf world than I do in the hearing world.

LB:

After high school, David stayed in the deaf world. He earned a degree at Gallaudet University in Washington DC, where classes are taught in both ASL and English. Then he moved home to Corner Brook. where he had few friends to sign with, and few opportunities.

DK:

Every job I've had since I came home in 2001 is through somebody I knew. I put out, oh my god, resumes on top of resumes. I came home in 2001 and I got my first job down on the Oceanex waterfront through my dad. Then when I started playing darts, I put out resumes again. Didn't hear nothing. Got a job through a friend of mine at the Valley Mall for 12 years. Then when it got sold, I moved on. I was nine months easily, with resumes everywhere in Corner Brook. Never had an interview, never had nothing. I don't know if people looked at it because they thought I was deaf, or I couldn't do it. Then, a friend of mine had a post online that they needed someone at work, and I went up and spoke to her. She was the first person to give me an opportunity in 9 months, and I'm still with the same place today.

LB:

David also came back to a province with few services for deaf and hard of hearing people. There are only four certified ASL interpreters in Newfoundland and Labrador. They're all in St John's - and waitlists for their services are long. Even the School for the Deaf closed its doors back in 2010.

St. John's is the only place where ASL courses are offered -- or, at least it was - until David sat down for a cup of coffee with Lynn.

LD:

We met up at a local Tim Horton's one night, and I had my clipboard and a bunch of ideas for what I wanted to learn, and how much I was expecting to pay. You know, I wanted some tutoring in sign language. And I think we sat there for an hour and a half to two hours, and at the end of it, we had a full plan for a class. Right from the get go, almost immediately, it was never about one-on-one. It was - this is something good. Let's try and reach out to the community and see who else wants to learn, so we can build a community of signers

DK:

I'll be going on 40, and I'm losing hearing gradually every year. Actually, I'm supposed to already be deaf. But I've been fortunate enough right now to keep my hearing as long as I have. But when Lynn contacted me, and she sat down at Tim Horton's and we had a talk, next thing you know it was idea after idea, how about teaching a class, and next thing you know, we had this big plan laid out.

\*\*\*\**Sound effects - David teaching sign language class*\*\*\*\*

DK:

The very first night I came in, I was sweating bullets. I've never ever taught in my life. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if I was going to be good enough to teach it. And I sat down with the first group and I looked around and I was like, OK, I can do this. CAN I do this? And Lynn was there, like, you can do this! You can do this! So I was like, OK. So I sat down and all of a sudden, it was like, OK everybody, put your hands up and do the ABCs. The bullets were just sweating right out of me, and I didn't know what to do. And all of a sudden we were doing the ABCs. And then as the hour went by, I just started to feel more and more relaxed. And then the next class, came in, and I was still nervous. But with each class, as the 8 weeks came, there was no nervousness no more, there was no sweating bullets no more. There was a group of friends coming to this room, and we were learning together. And that's what it was all about. But for me, from the first class to the last class was just - that first class was crazy! I didn't know what to do with myself. I was red in the face, blushing probably. I didn't know what to do.

LD:

It was really cool. We had 13 people in the building at night, we were like OK, we're all here to learn sign language. And we barely knew anybody's names and we didn't know each other's stories, nothing, we were complete strangers. And at the end of the hour, we were talking about

our kids and our jobs and our husbands. We were already so connected, because we were all there for one purpose. It instantly felt like home.

LB:

David taught his first students every Monday and Thursday in a makeshift classroom at the back of Kinder Castle. They signed back and forth between balloons and Harry Potter posters. And David encouraged them to keep practicing at home

LD:

During the 8 weeks, immediately after seeing somebody out in public or at the grocery store or at the gas station, and I saw somebody in the class, we would sign to each other: "hey, how are you? Are you practicing? Did you study?" It was so much easier to stay accountable to. If you didn't feel like signing that day, there are days you just don't feel like opening your book, but if you ran into somebody who was in the class, it was easier. You just immediately started signing.

DK:

These students, I couldn't believe it. When we started out this class, it was more of a basic ASL structure. And I was expecting them to learn maybe anywhere between 150, 200 words max. When this class graduated, they learned over 600 words. And I was stunned. When we done our testing on the last night, they sat down, and Lynn had test made up on both sides of paper, and I'm pretty sure all of them could pretty much sign almost everything on both sides of that paper. And it felt great.

*\*\*\*Sound effects: David and his students chatting and laughing in class\*\*\**

LB:

It is easy to forget David's hearing issues because he hides it so well. He doesn't wear hearing aides - they give him intense headaches. But after decades of practice, he can lip read his way through a lot of life. And spending time with him - you notice the amount of attention he pays to your conversation. There's no looking down at a smartphone.

The way audiologists measure it, David has what's called moderate hearing loss. But that doesn't just mean his world is simply a quieter one. It's also more distorted - and people sound like they're mumbling. Audiologists compare hearing to sifting sand through a sieve. Someone with hearing loss has very small holes, so things like pebbles can't make it through. Those stones represent certain vowels, consonants and sounds, that never make it to the brain, and leave a person grasping to fill in the gaps.

So when Lynn says this (clip of Lynn): *"I read a quote the other day - it's don't judge each day by what you harvest, but by the seeds you plant."*

To a person with mild hearing loss, to a far lesser degree than David's, it gets distorted to this (same clip, distorted) : *I read a quote the other day - it's don't judge each day by what you harvest, but by the seeds you plant*

\*\*\*\**sound effects, noisy Wingin It restaurant*\*\*\*\*

LB:

David's favourite chicken wing place is a pretty noisy spot. That can be a huge challenge for conversation, but right now, it's not such a big deal.

DK:

Are you getting the mach 1 wings?

LB:

David's squeezed into a booth beside Samantha Greene, chatting face to face. They're trying to figure out how they first met.

Samantha Greene:

It was definitely Junior High. We used to spend lots of time in your dad's living room watching Alanis Morissette videos, haha!

DK:

Oh yeah for sure, definitely! I can remember that.

\*\*\*\* *sound effects: Alanis Morissette's Hand in My Pocket fades up and then down*\*\*\*\*

SG:

I make it a point, that when David and I speak, when we have a conversation, or even if now, I'm talking about him with somebody else - I try to make it a point that if he's involved in the conversation, that he and I have a connection, so he can read my lips, and understand everything that's going on. He knows what I'm saying, so he's going to get a general idea of everything else that's being said.

DK:

I know everything that's being said now. But if i was looking away, I probably would've missed 60 per cent of that.

SG:

David is a really, really good lip reader. So it's something that he's perfected, I guess. And he's been doing it for so long that it just comes naturally. After a little while though, I would notice. If I would speak to him and I wasn't looking directly at him, or he couldn't see my face and couldn't read my lips, that he would kinda be like, whatdja say? Whatdja say?

DK:

I kept that side of me very private for a long time. I wasn't comfortable wearing hearing aids at first. And then in school I had to wear what was a called an FM System, which was this big thing, way back in the 80s, this big thing that they put on us. It felt very uncomfortable. As a kid, 7, 8, 9 years old, you didn't want to be that out-of-the-bunch type person. So it's kinda something I hid away for a long time, and kept to myself. But then, as the years go on, and I went to the School for the Deaf, I opened up more and more and became more comfortable with who i was.

*\*\*\*\*sound effects: server comes to table and puts food down\*\*\*\**

LB:

When David started advertising for those first sign language classes - Samantha was right there, signing up.

SG:

I'm the type of person who likes to learn anything and everything that I can anyway. But as soon as I realized david was going to be teaching ASL, through conversations that he and I have had in the past, and knowing his hearing is deteriorating, the first thing that came into my mind was, this is an excellent opportunity for me. Even though I know David can read lips and things like that, but this is an excellent opportunity for me to be able to communicate with him on a different level, once his hearing is gone.

LB:

Samantha threw herself into the classes, and even after those ended, she's kept studying her new second language with her old friend.

SG:

It is surreal, but it's a really wonderful feeling. I feel like it's brought David and I - we've always been really good friends - but I feel like this has brought us closer. A lot closer. And what I really like about ASL part of it, I guess, even when I'm speaking to David, and I do look at him and make sure he's able to read my lips and make sure he's getting my conversation, I find with the sign language, it's more than just him reading my lips. It's a more intimate conversation, because we're now using our body language, and our facial expressions, full attention. There's no interruption. I'm giving him my undivided attention, he's giving me his undivided attention.

DK:

It's more of a one-on-one conversation. And it's brought us closer together for sure.

LB:

Samantha took the class with her 16 year old daughter, and since then they've had their skills tested in the real world.

SG:

My daughter and I just ran into Colemans, just picking up a couple of things. And we were coming through the express line, and there was a gentleman in front of my daughter, a deaf gentleman, deaf-mute, he didn't speak either. And he was trying to purchase lottery tickets. He was trying to communicate with the girl behind the counter, and she had absolutely no idea what it was he was saying, trying to say. So my daughter actually reached out her hand and squeezed his elbow to get his attention. And when he turned around, she signed to him. She signed "hello, how are you today, can I help you?" And his face just lit like a Christmas tree, it just lit up. It was amazing. And they just had a conversation. My daughter and this gentleman had a conversation. He asked her where she learned sign language, and told her she was a very beautiful, helpful young lady. and when he was on his way out the door, he turned around and just expressed his thanks to her. And blew her a kiss, and off he went, out the door. It was great.

But it also made me proud, not only of her, but proud that this course is now offered here. And other people also now have the ability to come and learn ASL. And make it so that this gentleman, and other people like him, never ever have to feel that nobody understands them ever again. How wonderful would it be, if everybody, everybody, was included, and everybody was understood, 100 per cent?

DK:

That's a big goal of mine, to try and make it as many people as possible to be included.

To me, that was a positive moment. Especially when I got that text from Sam, and she told me what happened, I just sat there for a moment. I was just like, wow, I gave her those skills to do that. She put it to use. Those 8 weeks, when I gave up that Monday night and that Thursday night for 8 weeks with those people, to teach sign language, when it's all said and done and I look back, I didn't give up those nights. Those are nights that I met new friends, created new memories, the laughs that we had were unreal. Overall, it's a great thing, knowing that I did that. And that she was able to take it, and use it.

I could be in that gentlemans shoes one day, trying to purchase lottery tickets, and some lady's not going to be able to understand me, or get my point across of what I want. I'm getting a head start on it, while I still have my hearing.

LB:

His head start has made it easier to accept the deafness that lies ahead.

DK:

It's weird, because for some people it might be a fear, but I'm prepared for it. If it happens, it happens. If I keep what I have for the rest of my life, it's fantastic. It gives me the best of both worlds. If I do lose what I have, so be it. I can't control it, so it's no good to worry about it. If I wake up one morning deaf, well so be it. Life goes on. I keep on going. But right now I'm setting the foundation, so when I do go deaf, I don't need to be scared.

*\*\*\*\*sound effects: people moving chairs around, arranging them in Stephenville classroom\*\*\*\**

LB:

Fast forward a few months, and David's arranging desks for his latest class. He and Lynn now run a tutoring school in their spare time called West Coast ASL. David is teaching a kids signing class on Sundays, the basic ASL course on Mondays and Thursdays, and every Tuesday after work -- he drives an hour to spend his evening here:

DK:

We are right now in Stephenville, Newfoundland. We're at an elementary school, and we are here to teach 20 students ASL. This is their fifth week now I believe. And they've come a long way. And I'm very impressed, I'm very proud of what they've learned so far.

LB:

David's teaching style is a lot more assured than his first sweaty night at the front of a class

*\*\*\*\*sound effects: David explaining signs for coffee and cream, making jokes\*\*\*\**

DK:

I definitely feel that I'm a better teacher now than I was with the first group. Because as I continue to teach the same stuff over and over, and I learn new things, I think I feel I can present it better than the first time I done it. And I think by doing that, I'm becoming more confident in myself.

*\*\*\*\*\*sound effects: class laughing and David teaching\*\*\*\*\**

LB:

One student sitting along the back wall looks particularly focused. It's the same woman who a year ago, walked into Kinder Castle with her daughter, and sparked the whole idea for sign language classes in the first place.

Jennifer Parsons;

My name is Jennifer Parsons and I'm here doing ASL.

I was exposed to sign language with my daughter, who has autism. She is primarily non verbal. She started signing at a very early age, I want to say, maybe 3? Just from exposure to Baby Einstein videos. And myself and my husband were at the grocery store one day, and she was doing this, which is the sign for star - but we thought she was dancing to the music, and we thought, oh pretty cute. And then we saw her do it when the video was on, and we thought oh-ding ding ding! So we started mimicking the signs with her. It's exploded from there.

LB:

Jennifer and her husband have been signing the basics with their daughter ever since.

JP:

I think it's really opened her up, and made her more confident. And us too, in communicating with her. Because a lot of times we would both get frustrated, her not knowing how to tell us what she wanted, and us not knowing what she wanted. But I think it's made a huge difference, because she's just more confident. She's relaxed. When she's using her signs, she knows we understand what she wants, or what she needs, or just what she's talking about. It's amazing,

because living with a child on the spectrum is just a completely different ballgame. We just have the one child, but we're around a lot of people who have typical, growing children as well. And it's just day and night. So to see your child be able to do something that comes so naturally to other children, it's like the lights have been turned on. It's wonderful.

LB:

Hannah just turned 10. And although Jennifer signs with her daughter every day, she'd never had the opportunity to take a course in it until now.

JP:

To me, the class has just been - it's a miracle that it happened. We're going home and we're teaching her more signs that we learned here, that she didn't know. I'm teaching my husband, because he has to stay home with her while I'm at class. But it's also nice to know that other people in the community are learning signs. So it's not only the deaf community, it's the non verbal community, hard of hearing or hearing impaired. It makes people more comfortable in their surroundings, rather than feeling like they're not part of the community. Lynn is amazing, and of course through Lynn, came David. And now this course, and the both of them. It's been a huge, huge blessing for our family that they came into our lives.

\*\*\*\*\**sound effects - music plays*\*\*\*\*\*

LB:

Looking back - Lynn Drover wouldn't have had the classes happen any other way.

LD:

Coming into the store, in that moment, I know I felt I had defeated that girl, and that there was something that I should've been able to do, that I couldn't do. And I went home feeling upset. And I had a choice - I had a conscious choice that day. I said ok, I can either stay upset about this, or I can do something about it. And I decided to do something about it.

Like, David is known now as the deaf guy in the community. And it's hilarious, because people come up to him all the time and say, oh you're the guy who teaches ASL. When s your next class? And how's it going, and how's this affecting your life? It's allowing us to help people understand that while he speaks very well, and while he looks like he's not deaf, he most definitely is going deaf, and there are challenges that he faces that we might not understand. So it's bringing to light more issues than we would've ever thought would exist, and it's allowing our community to be more understanding about those issues, and be more educated.

JP:

It's hard because sometimes in a small community, you feel there's not enough services, there's not enough places that you can take your child. But then on the other hand you have this community mentality, where everyone bonds together and sticks up for one another. To see stuff like this, it's nice. Even if you don't have someone that you know who uses sign, just to get out and do something different. And know you're contributing to someone's life in this way, and you're having fun and a good night out - I'm sure you heard us laughing in there, it's a fun night out.

DK:

It means a lot to me. Especially knowing that when it started out, it was only supposed to be one on one. And now I have 50 new friends. 50 new people who know how to sign. 50 people who I contact on a daily basis, all the time. It just -- it just shows there are people out there who care, same as me, and want to spread this. Make it more inclusive for everybody. Take sign language and spread it. The west coast, it's something that we didn't have here. It was only me and a small group of people. And now it's that small group of people and 50 more. It's so overwhelming a feeling at times. When you think, sometimes I'm home and we're thinking what I've done so far, and what we've put out there, and I'm talking to Lynn, it seems like this came so far, in 7 months.

LB:

David says he's noticed his hearing getting worse all the time, but he has no plans to slow down. He's looking into getting official certification to become an ASL interpreter - and dreams of making signing a full time job. But David says he's at peace with whatever the future holds for him.

DK:

I'm still OK with the fact that, if I ever do go deaf, I'm prepared for it. By doing these classes, it's making me feel more prepared. I just hope - I'd just like to see it spread as far as I can get it. As long as it keeps going, and people want to do it, I'll still be here to teach it. As long as somebody wants to learn it, I'll do it.

LB:

For Atlantic Voice, I'm Lindsay Bird in Corner Brook